

Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for 5 minutes in the morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, the Washington Post printed an article last Sunday about a group of WWII veterans returning to the beaches of Normandy to share stories and remember fallen brothers. It was yet another reminder of the closing window of opportunity historians have to glean firsthand accounts from the generation of men and women who lived through the Great Depression, fought in WWII and came back to build America into the greatest power of health and wealth in the world.

The Washington Post wrote: "World War II veterans are dying at a rate of more than 1,000 a day. 'It's the equivalent to a library burning down every day,' said National Guard Maj. Gen. Gene Krase."

This week I'm presenting my Innovation in Education award to a group of students and educators in Wenatchee, Washington who are working to preserve the oral testimonies and firsthand accounts of the men and women who make up what some have called our greatest generation.

Allison Agnew's 11th grade Honors English class at Eastmont High School began the Honor By Listening program last year, which pairs each student with an elder in the Wenatchee valley to document his or her personal history. After the student recorded and transcribed oral testimonies, they wrote out each story in narrative form.

Businesses and leaders in the community support the process. Representatives from the North Central Washington Museum gave the students lessons on interviewing techniques and how to transcribe oral histories. Local librarians, attorneys, and business leaders joined educators to help the students edit their narratives. Materials and funds for publishing the final product came through donations from local businesses. It was a marvelous community effort.

Incidentally, one of my own staff members, Don Moos, has volunteered countless hours of his time to help connect students with potential interviewees. Don himself is a veteran who fought in the European theater during World War II. In fact, he won a Purple Heart in the Battle of the Bulge, but I have yet to hear his whole story though we have been friends for years. I look forward to reading about his experiences.

This year the junior class at Eastmont will continue the program. It already has obtained a list of 200 possible candidates to interview this fall.

I am proud of the efforts these students are putting forth to not only learn about, but to preserve, the rich heritage of Washington State. It is ef-

forts like these that convince me I am heading in the right direction with my Straight A's bill. If we give educators the freedom and flexibility to meet the unique needs of their students, while providing them with a system of accountability for the results, we will see more innovative programs like this one.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative assistant proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

THE VA-HUD APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, last Friday, the Senate passed the VA-HUD appropriations bill. I first want to commend the chairman and ranking member of that subcommittee for the superb job they did in managing that legislation as it went through the Senate.

I do want to indicate a concern about what was missing in that bill because there is one program that was not funded which I believe is very important to the country, certainly to my State, which is the Community Builders Program. It is my hope that this problem can be corrected in the conference committee. I asked the chairman and the ranking member of the VA-HUD appropriations subcommittee to pay special attention to attempting to provide the resources necessary to keep the Community Builders Program going.

Despite HUD's successful efforts to reduce staff and provide better service, the committee bill will result in the termination of more than 400 community builders across the country. That is a program that is working. This program is designed to bring new blood into that agency. It has been called a prototype for the new type of public servant in the 21st century. HUD, in recruiting for those 400 positions, had over 9,000 applications, including lawyers, academics, and economic and community development experts. These are people who were asked to come and give 2 years to helping revitalize HUD. We signed them up. We recruited them. We signed contracts with them, and now we tell them, sorry, we have changed our minds—even though the program is working. I don't think so.

The individuals who were selected to participate in community builders are experts in community outreach and development, who agreed to a 2-year term of service with HUD. They don't sit at a desk in Washington. They work in the 81 field offices doing face to face contact with people in the communities in which they serve. This is a program that has received accolades

from every independent source that has looked at the program, including evaluations conducted by Booz, Allen & Hamilton, the respected private firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the major accounting firms in the country, and the public strategies group—all who made independent reviews of the Community Builders Program and all of whom said it was a significant improvement for HUD.

If the community builders are now eliminated, some HUD field offices will drop below the minimum staffing level and will have to close. That includes the only office in my State. We have only one and it is going to close. Some people say: North Dakota is a small State, a rural State, you don't have many housing problems. Well, I can tell you that is not the case. We do have serious housing problems. Go to the Indian reservations in my State and you will see housing problems that are enormously serious.

But more than that, when disaster strikes, HUD is absolutely critical. We saw that in 1997 when the flooding disasters hit eastern North Dakota. Let me say that HUD's presence in the State was critically important to the recovery in North Dakota. Secretary Cuomo, in particular, was absolutely superb in his response to the crisis. He understood the very human impact this devastating flood was having on the people of Grand Forks and the people of eastern North Dakota, and he responded. He went out of his way to make certain that HUD's response took into account the unique circumstances of this event.

Rarely have I seen public servants respond in the way we saw in the 1997 flood disaster in North Dakota. I have heard lots of criticisms of HUD over the years, but I can tell you firsthand that their response was extraordinary, and I will never forget it.

Let me give one example. After the disaster bill passed Congress, top HUD staff, including the Secretary, stayed and worked all weekend at HUD headquarters in order to get the money out to North Dakota. That is a level of commitment we rarely see. They were there Saturday, Sunday, from morning until night, to get the money flowing. Indeed, we were able to get \$50 million into the hands of the Grand Forks community within 48 hours after the legislation passed. That is the kind of performance one would like to see from public servants on a routine basis. That is what we saw from HUD. They delivered, and they delivered in a way I think makes us all proud.

Because of HUD's quick work, Secretary Cuomo was able to provide that \$50 million in disaster recovery funds to the city to meet the immediate needs shortly after the bill was signed by the President. Without those funds and the dedicated work of countless HUD staff, Grand Forks would not have been able to recover from that devastating flood. I toured Grand Forks with the head of FEMA, James Lee